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AUTHOR Green, Thomas F.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explains why expansion of post-secondary education will not bring about a redistribution of certain other goods in American life. The educational system must distribute its benefits in certain ways, to certain people and for certain purposes. These factors all relate to problems of access, quality and goals. The American educational system is sequential, offers schooling up to a level that everyone must complete, and is selective beyond that level. No society has been able to expand its educational enterprise to include participation of the lower class in proportion to their numbers until the system is first saturated by the upper and middle classes. Thus, as the group of last entry approaches the target level of education, the target moves. This type of growth at the top results in more people spending more of their lives in the educational system, but not in fundamental changes in the system. Universalizing higher education makes it not a choice but a necessity. We should consider moving toward a national policy that provides for each individual a litigious claim to 15 years of education at public expense. But there should be no requirement that the years be spent consecutively in formal core or peripheral institutions, nor any but the most general restrictions as to content. (JS)

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Educational Policy Research Center
Syracuse University Research Corporation
1206 Harrison Street
Syracuse, New York 13210

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BREAKING THE SYSTEM: THE REDISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATIONAL AND NON-EDUCATIONAL GOODS

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It is almost an axiom of American educational policy that we expect the expansion of post-secondary education to bring about a redistribution of certain other goods in life. It will not do so, and this paper explains why.

Every educational system is a system for the distribution of certain goods and benefits. Never mind for the moment, what those goods and benefits are. We shall get to that soon enough. To say that every educational system must distribute goods and benefits is simply a convenient way of saying that some will learn more than others; some will become more skillful than others; some will develop better judgment than others, some will advance farther than others, and so forth. So what else is news! The question is not whether such results will occur, but whether they can be made to occur in a way that advances other goals of policy and promotes other socially desirable ends like justice, economic well-being, and human development.

It may be necessary and inevitable that the educational system distribute educational goods and benefits, like knowledge, skills, and taste. But there is no necessity or inevitability that the society distribute non-educational goods like jobs, status, and income, to accord with the distribution of educational goods and benefits. If we distinguish between educational and non-educational goods, then the strategic question for the society has to do with the linkage between these different kinds of life goods. The trauma of the issue is dramatically summed up in the

observation that what counts is not what college does for you if you do go, but what it does to you if you don't.

The educational system must distribute its benefits in certain identifiable ways, to certain people, and for certain purposes. Thus the pattern of distribution generally is related immediately to (1) how the system distributes its benefits, (2) to whom it distributes them, (3) at what time, and (4) for what purposes. These issues, in the American scene are especially important for the post-secondary sector. They relate directly to problems of (1) access, (2) quality, and (3) goals. It is possible to see why and how this happens from the following exercise.

Imagine an educational system with just three features.

(1) It is sequential.

(2) There is a level that everyone completes.

(3) Beyond that level, the system is selective.

Imagine, furthermore, that this educational system exists in a society strongly committed to the belief that education is good, and more of it will be better, primarily because it is a powerful instrument in gaining access to the good things in life--jobs, income and so forth. I shall refer to this as the belief in educational efficacy.

These systemic characteristics are nearly satisfied in the American situation where the belief in the efficacy of education is an article of faith. That fact has enormous influence on the ways that we think about policies for post-secondary education. Consider these features of the system one by one.

Our educational system is sequential. That is to say, it is structured so that, on the whole, in order to enter a particular

level, one must have completed the preceding level. The presence of this structural feature is one reason we tend to assume that educational opportunity is enlarged by encouraging more and more people to go on to the next level of the system, that is, by encouraging them to stay in school longer.

The second of the three characteristics above is important because in any educational system, if everyone completes a particular level of the system, then there can be no correlation between completing that level and any other social differences that may subsequently arise in the society. There may remain significant advantages in completing that level in a certain way, but there can be none in merely completing that level of the system. In the United States we are approaching this point of zero-correlation at the level of grade twelve. In a society where the purpose of attaining higher and higher levels of education is the presumed advantage it gives in securing jobs, income and other goods of life, then when everyone completes high-school, for example, the relative advantages reduce to zero. If the belief in the efficacy of education is to be preserved, there must occur pressures to expand the system above the high-school. The point of this principle can be given a poignant rendering. The reason we have a drop out problem in this country is not because there are lots of drop outs, but because there are not lots of them. In a society where there are lots of drop-outs, being one is no problem. But as the society approaches the point of zero-correlation at grade twelve, it is not simply belief in the efficacy of education that is threatened. As that point is approached it will necessarily become more of an individual disaster not to complete grade twelve, but by the same token it will become less of a benefit to complete it. Completing grade twelve is transformed from a beneficial choice to a necessity. Clearly two assumptions are strong in this process--the assumption of the efficacy of education, and the assumption that the system must be sequential.

Consider the third component in this imaginary system. In saying that the system is selective beyond grade twelve, I mean to suggest not simply that some go on and some do not or that some choose to go on and some choose not to. I mean that among those that choose to go on some are chosen, and some are not. The mission of the comprehensive high school was to eventually include everyone. It was, in principle, an inclusive mission. Until recently, however, it had not been the mission of the post-secondary system to include everyone. Colleges typically have admissions offices; high schools typically do not. There are exceptions to both. But in general the American system is selective just beyond that point where we are approaching zero-correlation.

When we add to these considerations one additional generalization, the distributive problems of post-secondary education come into view. It simply is a fact that no society in the world has been able to expand its educational enterprise to include participation of the lower class in proportion to their numbers until the system is first saturated by the upper and middle classes. In short, there is a definable law that governs the sequence in which people will benefit from any expansion of the system. There will be a group of last entry as the system approaches one-hundred per cent participation at some level, and that group of last entry will be from the lower socio-economic strata of society.

This fact has interesting implications. The motive for members of the group of last entry to finish at grade twelve will probably be to gain the same benefits from the system as others have gained. Given the belief in the efficacy of education and given the sequential nature of the system, the pressure will be to go farther in the system. Thus, as the group of last entry approaches their target, the target will move. This phenomenon will be associated with race only in a society where membership in the group of last entry is associated with race. It is a phenomenon clearly resulting from the sequential structure of the system together with a belief that non-educational goods are distributed on the basis of educational goods and benefits.

The implications of this state of affairs are too numerous to discuss briefly. But some can be mentioned. First of all, such a system as I have described has no clearly defined inherent limits on its growth. In a society that believes in the value of education and that more of it will be better, the natural tendency will be to make the system expand to ever higher and higher levels. In fact, it can expand in any or all of five ways--(1) in response to changes in the composition of the population, (2) by extending the system upward, (3) or downward, (4) by expanding outward to take in more and more activities heretofore conducted outside the system, or (5) by intensification of effort within the system (to accomplish more in the same time or the same in less time). Three of these modes of growth will result in leading people to spend more of their lives in the educational system. None of them will lead to fundamental change in the structure of the system.

We are reaching the point at which growth at the top can occur only in the post-secondary sector. But policies aimed simply at expanding the system are impoverished in their conception. They offer an unchanging answer to the question as to how the system distributes its benefits to whom at what time, and for what purpose. It does so by schools, school attendance and school programs to certain age groupings for the purpose of more equitably distributing life chances. That is the same old story all over again.

But clearly there are limits beyond which it is no longer socially beneficial, or, more importantly, educationally valuable, to encourage people to stay in school for a longer and longer sequence of years. We must recognize two points. As schooling becomes universal, that is prima facia evidence that the opportunity to go to school is universalized. But it is also prima facia evidence that the necessity of schooling has been universalized. In other words, the attainment of universal post-secondary schooling appears to represent a goal of maximizing the choice

for education beyond the high school. But in fact, such a target may only represent the elimination of any choice. Schooling, under such circumstances becomes a necessity, not a choice.

But secondly, we must ask whether there are any conditions under which it would be socially beneficial or educationally valuable for people to spend half their lives in schools. One-third? Three quarters? There is a limit at some point, a limit to what is educationally valuable to do. Does the mere extension of the system into the post-secondary sector cross that point? People will answer the question in different ways. But uncritical adoption of growth policies for the system will answer this question without having asked it. The question is especially poignant at a time when youth are maturing earlier, and when it is increasingly acknowledged that interruptions in the sequence of schooling are often educationally more valuable than adherence to the sequential structure of the system itself. For example, it is not implausible to conjecture that there are enormous numbers of talented youth who might benefit more educationally by leaving the system before completing high school and returning later at a point beyond high school. Uncritical adoption of growth policies for post-secondary education not only will fail to confront these issues, but will merely defer the point at which further upward growth will force the same issues to emerge at a somewhat higher level. Thus, such targets for policy do not, by themselves, confront the questions as to how, to whom, at what time, and for what social and educational purposes the system will distribute its benefits. They do not examine the question as to how educational and non-educational goods shall be linked in their distribution.

The strategic policy questions have to do not with how to extend the system into the post-secondary sector, but with how to alter the structure of the system itself and therefore change its pattern of growth. For these purposes, the sensitive points to attack are the assumptions that the system should be sequential and the assumption that it should be selective beyond

grade twelve. The pattern of selectivity is and will continue to be the point of first attack. But ultimately what must be changed is the assumption that the system will distribute its benefits within a certain sequence of years.

Consider the effects of the following set of policy proposals. We need to move toward a national policy that provides for each individual a litigous claim to fifteen years of education at public expense. But this intention should be framed with no assumption that those years will be spent consecutively in formal schools, nor should there be any but the most general restrictions at the upper levels as to what the content should be or whether it occurs in core or peripheral institutions. If a man reaches fifty and has claimed only twelve years, he should be entitled to three more. If a child chooses to leave school for several years at grade ten, and can enter again at grade thirteen, then he should be entitled to five more. Such a direction of change should be accompanied by lowering the school-leaving age to fourteen, and subsequently with the removal of compulsory education laws from grade one progressively up.

The consequences of such measures would probably include the following. First, the social demand for education, expressed as a demand for formal schooling in an established sequence of years, would tend to decline. The opportunity for education might once again become a choice to be exercised rather than a necessity to be undertaken. Secondly, the forms in which education takes place might be greatly expanded. We might move more rapidly in the direction of an educating system rather than the more limited notion of a system of schools and colleges. Thirdly, the attainment of education would tend to be distributed not over longer and longer consecutive periods in the life of the individual, but over shorter spans of time in the entire life cycle of an individual. This, in turn, would facilitate the human demand to be able to change directions in the course of a single life. Such a set of policy measures would tend to break the sequential structure of the system and transcend the selective

assumptions of the post-secondary sector. But more important, it would hopefully tend to render advanced education once more an opportunity to be chosen for the development of human beings rather than a social necessity to be born in order to gain access to non-educational goods.